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Do light beers have any health benefits?

With conflicting stories about the effects drinking beer has on [cholesterol levels](#), we take a look at how safe it is to drink, what type to choose – and whether it might even have some hidden health benefits.

Is beer bad for heart health?

Beer generally gets a bad heart-health rap thanks to its calorie and sugar content. This raises your risk of obesity, particularly abdominal obesity, which in turn is a risk factor for [high cholesterol](#). But the story isn't as clear-cut as it first seems, as beer may also confer some heart benefits.

One reason is that the barley, malt and hops used to brew beer contain [polyphenols](#) – plant compounds that have been linked to lowering cholesterol levels and overall risk of heart disease. Beer is also a reasonable source of vitamin B6, a nutrient that helps dampen the effect of homocysteine, a blood chemical associated with a higher risk of heart disease.

Heavy drinking – more than 14 units a week on a regular basis – still carries strong health warnings. But there is some evidence suggesting that consuming moderate amounts of alcohol, including beer, may help protect against heart disease.

This protection is normally found in men over 40 and postmenopausal women. But in [2017, researchers](#) from the University of Cambridge and University College London found that moderate drinkers (equivalent to a pint of beer a day) were less likely to have a [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#) compared with both teetotalers and heavy drinkers. This protection was found in both men and women aged over 30.

The link between beer and cholesterol

A cholesterol test will reveal the three types of fat in your blood: HDL and LDL cholesterol – the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ types – and triglycerides, another type of ‘bad’ fat. A healthy cholesterol level generally means having higher HDL and lower LDL cholesterol and triglycerides.

The good news is that some research, including one study by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has found that a daily beer is associated with a reduction in LDL cholesterol of up to 18%. [Another study](#) by Penn State University in the US discovered that moderate beer consumption appears to help people maintain decent levels of HDL cholesterol. However, the study concluded that drinking three or more beers a day was found to send bad cholesterol levels soaring.

Drinking beer also has an effect on triglycerides, the fats in your blood. This is because beer contains both carbohydrates and alcohol, two substances that raise triglyceride levels – raised triglyceride levels often come with lowered HDL cholesterol levels. Most beers tend to be calorie-dense too, so if your consumption is high enough to lead to weight gain, this in turn could harm your overall cholesterol levels.

Which beer is healthiest?

Not all beers are created equal. Today you can buy low-alcohol beers and lighter lagers, but which is best for your cholesterol levels?

Alcohol-free beer

Most beers tend to contain around 4–6% alcohol. In order to be called ‘alcohol-free’, a beer must contain less than 0.5% alcohol. But do alcohol-free beers offer any specific heart health benefits?

A small [study by the University of Valencia](#) in 2009 found that as well as reducing the dangerous build-up of fat in the arteries of those with high levels of bad cholesterol, booze-free beer also increased the amount of antioxidants in drinkers' blood, which could offer additional heart protection.

Low-alcohol or reduced-alcohol beer

To be described as 'low-alcohol', a beer must contain less than 1.2% alcohol. 'Reduced-alcohol' beer meanwhile, means it has an alcohol content lower than the average strength for that type of beer. Both versions tend to be lower in calories – for example, half a pint of reduced-alcohol beer contains approximately 60 calories, compared with a standard-strength lager at more than 100 calories.

Low-carb beers

Although there's no fixed definition of what a low-carbohydrate beer is, standard beer contains around 11 g of carbohydrates per half pint, while low-carb beers tend to have 2 g of carbohydrates for the same size serving. Remember that low-carb beer has only been brewed to remove carbohydrates, so it could have the same alcohol content as standard beer. Low-carb beers are also quite difficult to find in the UK.

The verdict

Alcohol-free beer is the cholesterol – and general heart health – winner. Removing alcohol also reduces calories, which over time could help keep excess weight off and further protect your heart.

Low-alcohol beer is also a healthy choice as it has less alcohol and fewer calories, but just be careful you don't end up drinking more of it!

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